

23 December 1982

SOVIET APPROACH TO CW/BW ARMS CONTROLKey Observations

A review of the Soviet performance in the CW/BW arms control arena provides a particularly vivid example of the contrast between Soviet public advocacy and private abrogation: while posing publicly as a most ardent proponent and early adherent of the two sweeping international agreements that have sought to abolish chemical and biological "weapons of mass destruction," the Soviet Union privately has carefully preserved and nurtured its capability to employ such weapons. With a view, no doubt, to protecting this capability, the USSR steadfastly resists any effective provisions to verify compliance with such agreements. By now, moreover, the evidence is incontrovertible that the USSR is directly implicated in the use of lethal chemical and toxin weapons in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, thus violating the spirit if not the letter of the agreements to which it is a party.

Soviet behavior in this sphere may not be entirely cynical. It probably rests on a Soviet mirror-imaging view that other nations also behave deceptively, and that the USSR must be prepared to cope with deception in this sphere as in others. Soviet literature indicates clearly that the Soviet Union believes other countries to be in violation of the CW/BW agreements and that it fully expects that these banned weapons will be used against them in any major future conflict.

We may also conjecture that the Soviet political decision to permit use of CW/Toxin weapons in the Southeast Asian and Afghan conflicts was not taken idly, but on the basis of a weighing of the balance of advantage. Those conflicts have a high security significance for the USSR; the chemical substances and delivery tactics employed are militarily quite effective in the special circumstances of those conflicts; and the risks of publicly credible detection must be deemed to have been low. For the Soviet leadership, therefore, the security benefits of its violation probably appeared positive, while the political costs may have seemed negligible, at least up to now.

Nor has the Soviet Union suffered any notable political detriment from its overall posture on CW arms control--the contradiction between its public and private behavior. Soviet propaganda exploitation of global apprehensions and anxieties concerning these weapons has been most skillful. By resorting to the familiar Soviet techniques of outright fabrication, reckless charges, clever distortions, bizarre disinformations, and carefully orchestrated propaganda campaigns, the USSR has managed to divert attention from its own violations and portray itself as the champion of peace and decency. In the CW/BW arms control arena, these techniques have proved remarkably effective in sustaining worldwide hopes that a comprehensive chemical weapons treaty may still be negotiable.

Prospects for such a treaty, however, are not bright. Since 1977, when bilateral US-USSR negotiations on the treaty began, several areas of agreement have been reached covering such matters as scope, definitions and destruction. The negotiations bogged down, however, primarily over Soviet

intransigence on the issues of verification and assurances, and these remain as the singlemost stumbling block. In July, 1982 the Soviet Union-- in order to demonstrate "seriousness" and show some "movement" after taking considerable heat on the CW-use issue--tabled a new set of CW treaty proposals that are marginally more forthcoming on the verification provisions. However, given the entire pattern of Soviet perceptions and behavior, it is most unlikely that the USSR would bend enough on this crucial issue to make a satisfactorily verifiable treaty regime possible.